Mr. Average American

A Rolling Meadows man, who appeared on national television in 1972 as the typical middle-class American, views this year's election on Page 3.

Average American plans to pick Ford

By Mark Fineman

The average American will vote for President Gerald R. Ford this November.

Though he's a Democrat, the average American thinks Jimmy Carter is "indecisive." He thinks abortion should be made illegal and he thinks the major issues in the presidential campaign will be jobs and inflation.

Mr. Average American is 47-year-old Richard Johnson, who was selected by computers in 1972 as the most average American in the country. Johnson, a resident of north suburban Rolling Meadows, discussed this year's election last week on the night the Democratic Party nominated Jimmy Carter for President.

"I just don't think he's going to make it in November," Johnson said, pointing to the color-TV set flickering with the Democratic National Convention in the corner of his basement family room. "He's come up too fast, and it's hard to trust the man.

"And I think Ford will beat (Ronald) Reagan in the Republican National Convention — at least I hope so," Johnson added. "I think Ford is honest. He hasn't done all that bad a job so far. If the Democrats had put up Sen. (Hubert H.) Humphrey or Sen. (Edward M.) Kennedy, I'd have voted Democratic. But I think I'll have to vote Republican this year."

It won't be the first time for Johnson.

"I guess I regret it now, but I voted for Richard M. Nixon in 1972," Johnson said quietly. "But I still think he was better than Sen. George McGovern. McGovern was a good man, but he changed his mind too often. He didn't seem to have much backbone."

The major reason Johnson was chosen as the average American in 1972 was to assess George McGovern's chances of victory during the presidential campaign. The national foundation that selected Johnson from mountains of computer cards had sent him on McGovern's campaign trail. He was to spend 10 days with McGovern and view the candidate objectively — as an average American would.

"He just kept going back and forth on issues. I couldn't trust a man like that in the White House," Johnson said. "And, in many ways, we're in the same boat again this year. Carter hasn't really come out and told us what he's all about. How do we know if we can trust him?"

Johnson's wife Mary Ann and 20-year-old son Rick both agree with his position on the presidential race.

Johnson, the father of four, grew up in Evanston and on Chicago's North Side. He works as a credit manager at an Evanston steel firm. He commutes 21 miles to work every day. He lives in an average bilevel home in an average suburb. And he considers himself average.

Mr. Average American Richard Johnson discusses his view of the upcoming presidential election while relaxing in his Rolling Meadows home with his wife Mary Ann. (Photo by Linda Lipman)

"Maybe typical is a better word than average," Johnson said. "I do think I am typical of the average American. I have a fairly good income, but I also have a mortgage. I'm not rich, but I'm not poor enough for welfare or other government aid. And basically, like most Americans, I don't think politics is very important."

But Johnson does have some other opinions on politics.

"I don't think foreign affairs is all as important as it's cranked up to be," Johnson said. "I don't think very many people appreciate America and what it's doing for them. I think we should tell a lot of these countries where to go and stop giving them aid. We give and give, and they just tell us, 'Yankee go home.'"

As the announcement came over the TV that Carter had just been nominated as the Democratic Party's candidate for President, Johnson said: "I don't know. I think this party-unity stuff is a lot of poppycock. There's no such thing. People are always disagreeing with each other to some extent. It has to be that way."

At the end of the interview, Johnson added: "You know, I think history will show that the greatest President this country ever had was Harry S. Truman. You always knew where he stood, and he ran this country with a firm hand. I liked him."